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The Puzzle of the Pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus*

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Although the *Axiochus* was already recognised as spurious in antiquity, it enjoyed a significant status along with other *spuria* in the *Corpus Platonicum*. However, its arguments seem carelessly cobbled together. They are mutually inconsistent and internally flawed. Scholars have addressed this issue in different ways. Some argue that the *Axiochus* is irredeemably confused. Others argue that the dialogue belongs to the genre of consolation literature, in which consistency was not expected. More recently, Tim O'Keefe has argued that the dialogue demonstrates the Socratic practice of "therapeutic inconsistency", showing readers how to use invalid arguments to induce comforting beliefs. The inconsistencies are best explained, however, as a parody of Hellenistic therapeutic arguments. At the same time, the *Axiochus* underscores a long-standing Platonic emphasis on thinking critically even in the face of death. This emphasis was demonstrated in the *Phaedo* by Socrates' commitment to argument when his interlocutors were afraid for him and themselves. It is demonstrated in the *Axiochus* by the way Socrates repeatedly encourages Axiochus to consider the arguments he presents. The consoling therapy of the *Axiochus*, I shall argue, is simply that the practice of reasoning calms fears by setting them to one side.[1]

I. Introduction

The *Axiochus* is a Socratic dialogue written in the style of Plato's early works. We know nothing for certain about its origin except that the third century

[1] Parts of this paper were presented at the 12th International Conference on Greek Research, Flinders University 2017, and at a Durham University Department of Classics Seminar that same year. A fuller version was presented at a University of Sydney Philosophy Department Seminar in September 2018. I would like to thank David Bronstein, Han Baltussen, Matilda Howard, Anthony Hooper, George Boys-Stones and Philip Horky for helpful advice.

CE biographer Diogenes Laertius lists it among the dialogues that were already in antiquity acknowledged to be spurious "by common consent" (*homologoumenōs*; *Lives* III.62.10).[2] It is exceedingly short (about half the length of Plato's shortest dialogue, *Ion*). In dramatic structure it resembles most closely Plato's comic dialogues *Ion* and *Hippias Major*. According to Harold Weatherby (1990:77) the *Axiochus* was attributed to Aeschines "from an early date", while Renaissance Neoplatonists "thought it was by Xenophon". These attributions are undoubtedly erroneous,[3] but they suggest that despite its confessed inauthenticity the *Axiochus* enjoyed a significant reputation as a Socratic work, for a long time within Academic circles. The author, whoever he is, clearly knows his Plato,[4] and is respectful towards Academic positions. These few facts about the *Axiochus*, along with its preservation in the *Corpus Platonicum* are sufficient to discount the view that the work originated outside of the Academy, or that its intent is hostile to Plato.

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[2] Timothy O'Keefe (2006:389) wrongly asserts that the *Axiochus* was "grouped by Thrasyllus among the spurious dialogues at the end of his canon of Plato's works". In fact, it is not included in the canon of Thrasyllus (as reported by Diogenes, who is our only source). Whether this was because Thrasyllus already knew the work to be spurious (Chroust, 1965:38) or for some other reason, we may only speculate. The fact that Diogenes mentions several *spuria* while discussing the canon of Aristophanes of Byzantium (which predates Thrasyllus) suggests that the *Axiochus* may have been in existence from around the end of the third century BCE, but that is hardly conclusive.

[3] The attribution of the ps-Platonic *Axiochus* to Aeschines is based upon a confusion. Aeschines wrote a dialogue called *Axiochus* (Diogenes Laertius II.61), but fragments preserved in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* (5.220), Priscian's *Institutes of Grammar* (18.296) and Julius Pollux's *Onomasticon* (Z.135) show that this was a different work. The attribution of the ps-Platonic *Axiochus* to Xenophon is probably based upon conjecture about the identity of the Persian magus, Gobryas (mentioned in the dialogue as the source of an eschatological myth), since Xenophon describes a certain Gobryas in his *Cyropaedia* (IV.6.1–11). It is unlikely that these are the same person, however, since Xenophon's Gobryas was a general, not a magus.

[4] The *Axiochus* contains echoes of the *Apology, Gorgias,* and *Phaedo,* a direct reference to the *Protagoras* and mention of persons familiar from other Socratic dialogues. For the echoes, compare *Axiochus* 365c–366b with *Apology* 40c-d (see Furley, 1986:78), *Axiochus* 371a–e with *Gorgias* 523a–527c (see O'Keefe, 2006:391n10) and *Axiochus* 370c–d with *Phaedo* 66–68 and 80–83. The reference to the *Protagoras* appears at *Axiochus* 366c, where the setting of the *Protagoras* is described in some detail. *Axiochus* 364a mentions Clinias, Charmides, and Damon, familiar respectively from the *Euthydemus, Charmides* and *Laches.*

About its date we are uncertain.[5] It has been suggested, though without sufficient evidence, that its style and vocabulary are Hellenistic (Taran, 2001:105n141; O'Keefe, 2006:389).[6] More significant is the fact that it contains two passages presenting arguments about death and not-being that were standard in Epicurean philosophy (365d–e, 369b–371a).[7] It would be remarkable if the *Axiochus* or its source material predated Epicurus,[8] so a date much before the beginning of the third century BCE is implausible. It is probably a product of the Academy, sometime between 275–100 BCE. Beyond that we can only guess.

II. Summary of the *Axiochus*

The plot and structure of the *Axiochus* are straightforward. Socrates is asked to visit Axiochus on his deathbed to calm his fears about dying, and he presents arguments for why Axiochus should not be afraid. Six arguments

[5] Hutchinson (1997:1735) places the composition of the *Axiochus* between 100 BCE and 50 CE. O'Keefe says that it could have been composed anywhere between 300 BCE and 36 CE (2006:389), but then, following Hershbell (1981:1), says that it "was probably composed in the second century BCE or later" (2006:390).

[6] Taylor (1911:550) says simply that it is "full of non-Attic words and phrases". That much is certainly true. And there are some words, such as *oikeion* (365e4) and *pneuma* (370c5) that have a distinctly Stoic ring to them (cf. Hutchinson, 1997:1734). But even these words are used in a way that is not found in Stoicism (see O'Keefe, 2006:391n10; Taran, 2001:105n142).

[7] Both passages present versions of the standard, general "Death is Nothing to Us" argument, according to which there is no reason to fear death because while we live, death has not occurred, and when death has occurred, we are no longer. The first passage (365d–e) contains in addition what has come be known as the "Symmetry Argument" according to which one has as little to fear from a future after death as one had to fear from a past before one was born. This supplement to the general argument is known to us only from Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura* III.831–842). The second passage (369b–371a) resembles the argument that appears in Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeceus* (124–5), though it includes an additional reference to Scylla and Centaur (non-existent creatures) that is reminiscent of Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura* IV.732–743), along with a response to what is known as the "Deprivation of Goods" counter-argument, which is also reminiscent of Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura* III.894–99). The Lucretian elements make a later date tempting, but as Lucretius is admittedly a purveyor rather than an inventor of arguments, this would be a hasty conjecture.

[8] The *Axiochus* itself attributes these arguments to Prodicus (see 369b), and it is possible, given Epicurus' propensity to take material from earlier sources without acknowledgment, that he owes some debt to Prodicus (see Miller, 1976:171), but the simplest explanation for this curious attribution is that the author of the *Axiochus* needs to avoid anachronism (see Furley, 1986:79n5).

are presented in sequence; two of which reprise earlier arguments. *Pace* O'Keefe (2006:388, 390, 392, 396), Socrates does not advance these arguments *in propria persona*, but in fact attributes every one of them to another source.[9] The first five arguments are attributed to Prodicus (366c, 369b) and the final argument to Gobryas, an obscure Persian magus (371a, 372a). The arguments have been classified by scholars according to the similarity of their content to arguments from other sources. I will follow that classification (mostly) here, but without presuming that the label implies a full commitment to their provenance or implications.

The first argument (365d–e) is the "Epicurean" argument. It asserts that, as death involves the onset of "insensibility" (*anaesthesia*, 365d2), there is no reason to fear dreadful experiences or loss of pleasant experiences. There follows a symmetry argument:

> Just as in the regime of Draco or Kleisthenes there was nothing bad for you (for there was no you for whom there could be [anything bad]), so nothing [bad] will happen after your death, for there will not be a you for whom there will be [bad things]. (365d7–e2)[10]

The salient point here is that there is no reason to fear death because there will be no subject of harm *post mortem*.

The second argument (365e–366b) is the "Platonic" argument (so-called because of its resemblance to the *Phaedo*). According to this argument death is simply the "dissolution" (*dialusis*) of the body-soul compound. The body is not the human being, but rather the soul, which is immortal. During earthly life, the soul is imprisoned in the body, forced to experience sensation, desire, pain and pleasure — all bad things on this account. When separated from the body the soul is free to depart to its proper home, in the

[9] One could suggest that Socrates *initially* presents the first two arguments (365d–e, 365e–366b) *in propria persona*, but even that suggestion is mitigated by Axiochus' reference, prior to Socrates' presentation, to the "masterful and extraordinary arguments" (*karteroi kai perittoi logoi*, 365c3) he has previously heard. It would be natural for Socrates to suppose that Axiochus' phrase refers to the arguments of a sophist, and for him (ironically or not) to represent such arguments. At any rate, immediately following the presentation of the first two arguments, Socrates dispels any confusion. He says, "These things I say are echoes of the wise Prodicus" (366c1, where "these things" appears to include *both* arguments).

[10] All translations in this article, unless otherwise acknowledged, are my own.

heavenly aether, to live there forever. So, one should not fear death because it involves going to a better place.

The third argument (366d–369b) enjoins Axiochus to take comfort in death by way of contrast with the misery of life. Because its specific content resembles material associated with Crates and Bion (Hershbell, 1981:16–17), it has been called the "Cynic" argument, even though its general tone is Tragic. It is the longest and most rhetorical of the arguments presented, and resembles, more than any other arguments in the *Axiochus* the sort of thing found in Hellenistic consolations.

The fourth and fifth arguments reprise the Epicurean and Platonic arguments, respectively. They are slightly different from the first versions, but neither one contains anything that adds significantly to the logical force of its first version. The reprise of the Epicurean argument has a curious interlude in which Axiochus complains that it is distracting and ineffective, but Socrates merely responds with a more careful restatement. The reprise of the Platonic argument presents a whiff of support for the immortality of the soul (the accomplishments of the mind are not possible unless there were something divine about it, 370b–c). It follows up by reiterating that the body is a prison for the soul, and by emphasising rationality, comprehension, insight, philosophy and Truth.

The final argument is made by way of an eschatological myth not entirely dissimilar to those found in Plato's *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*. It urges the good not to fear death, for they will be rewarded in the afterlife, while evildoers will be punished. The Platonic myths figure elsewhere in Hellenistic consolation literature and so it has been suspected that the author of the *Axiochus* is drawing on them.[11] At the same time, however, the *Axiochus* takes care to establish the non-Platonic credentials of the story (371a). Its immediate source is the Persian magus Gobryas, who heard the myth from his grandfather Gobryas, who learned it from bronze tablets brought from Hyperborea by Opis and Hecaerge. According to the myth, the rewards for the good include fruit, fountains, meadows, flowers, philosophy, poetry, theatre, dance, music, symposia, and feasts, that is to say, "a life of pleasures" (*hēdeia diaita,* 371d3). The highest honours are reserved for initiates (*tois memuēmenois*, 371d5–6), who are associated with the Eleusinian

[11] See especially ps-Plutarch *Consolatio ad Apollonium* 120e–121e. On this see Boys-Stones (2012:125, 132–34).

goddess. These details, especially the inclusion of so many sensual pleasures in the afterlife, suggest caution about calling the myth Platonic in anything but its widest sense. Accordingly, I will refer to it as the "mystery religion" argument.

III. The puzzle of the *Axiochus*

What puzzles scholars about the *Axiochus* is that its arguments are not consistent with one another. The Epicurean argument (at least as traditionally understood) denies any sort of immortality. After death, both the soul and the body are dispersed and the person is no more. The Platonic argument contradicts that by maintaining that there is an immortal soul. So does the mystery religion argument. In addition, the character of the afterlife described by the mystery religion argument is inconsistent with that described by the Platonic argument. For one thing, the Platonic argument makes no mention of, nor does it imply, any judgment for the good or wicked. For another, the Platonic afterlife is intellectual; it involves "philosophising, not among the crowd or in the theatre, but in the midst of all-surrounding truth" (370d5–6). And while the first version of the Platonic argument does mention feasting and dancing in the heavenly aether (366a8), it otherwise repudiates anything sensual (366a4–5). So, either this feasting and dancing are metaphorical, or the Platonic argument is self-inconsistent. We may add further that the Cynic argument is inconsistent with the general Epicurean view about life. Of course, a life may be miserable if it pursues the wrong things, but if one is prudent, good things are easy to obtain and pains are easy to endure (Epicurus, *Principle Doctrines* 4, 15, 21). The several arguments of the *Axiochus*, though not presented by Socrates *in propria persona,* are nevertheless not presented as disjunctions. How could the author of the *Axiochus* not see how disparate and contradictory they are?

Scholars have responded to this puzzle in different ways. No one has attempted to defend an interpretation of the arguments according to which they are all consistent with one another.[12] David Furley (1986:79) bites the

[12] O'Keefe (2006:393n11) sketches an outline of an interpretation that "with some tweaking and twisting" could be made "to tell an almost consistent story". For example, the inconsistency between the Platonic argument and the mystery religion argument is no worse than similar inconsistencies found in Plato (e.g. cf. *Phaedo* 80d–84c with *Phaedo* 107d–114d; note however that the latter passage adds the qualification against taking it literally, 114d1–2), and the disparagement of life found in the Cynic argument is at least consistent with some of the

bullet and declares that the author has descended into "irredeemable confusion". Douglas Hutchinson (1997:1734) suggests that the *Axiochus* belongs to the genre of the Hellenistic consolation, wherein arguments were borrowed "from all possible sources, whether or not the ideas were mutually consistent." More recently, Timothy O'Keefe (2006:400–406) has suggested that the *Axiochus* is intended as a primer for therapeutic practice, and that the expression of inconsistent arguments is to be explained as a technique within that practice. According to O'Keefe (2006:396), "as a therapist, I may be unsure which beliefs my patient holds, and so I will try out arguments that derive from various premises, whether or not they're consistent, in order to try to find one that will be effective".

None of these current proposals about the *Axiochus* is satisfactory. In the next three sections I will explain why they are unsatisfactory. Following that I will present a better solution. First, I will argue that the best explanation of the inconsistencies is that the *Axiochus* is a parody of Hellenistic therapeutic arguments. I will show that there are other elements of parody in the *Axiochus* that support this view. But the *Axiochus* is not merely parody. It demonstrates a kind of philosophical consolation, in which preoccupation with thinking through the arguments relieves us of the fear of death.

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harsher things said about life in the *Phaedo* (e.g. 66b–67b). But squaring the Epicurean argument with the Platonic argument is difficult, and O'Keefe balks at that point. Strictly, the two versions of the Epicurean argument presented to Axiochus do not assert the mortality of the soul. They only claim that the compound of soul and body are dissolved. Nor do they claim that a person will cease to exist altogether after death, but only that "there won't be a *you*" (365e2). This might be taken to suggest that only the compound will cease to exist. One could argue, then, that a consistent position is sustained that asserts the existence of an impersonal, immortal soul across both the Epicurean and the Platonic arguments. (In this connection see: "for we are soul" [*hēmeis men gar esme psuchē*], 365e6, where *psuchē* is general, not individuated.) This interpretation faces significant difficulties, however. First, we would have to regard the Epicurean arguments as Epicurean in form, but as being deployed with a distinctively different meaning. If some Academics had appropriated the Epicurean arguments in this way, one would think they would take great care to distinguish their version from the Epicurean one. No such care seems to be employed in the *Axiochus*. In fact, the comparison of a dead person with the Scylla and Centaur (clearly non-existent beings) shows a distinct lack of care in this regard. Second, there remains a question about who or what survives death. On the proposed interpretation, the individual ceases, while the impersonal soul exists forever. But at *Axiochus* 365e5–6 Socrates says that when the body-soul compound is dissolved, "the body that remains, being earthly and irrational, is not the person". This strongly implies that the soul *is* the person, even if the immediately following "for we are soul" suggests otherwise.

IV. Is the *Axiochus* "irredeemably confused"?

Charity demands that we should try to show that the *Axiochus* is not irredeemably confused. Even though it was recognised as spurious, the *Axiochus* was preserved in the *Corpus Platonicum*. We must at least account for the status it held among Academics and Platonists. Diogenes Laertius does not cite inconsistency as a reason for inauthenticity. Of course, if it was a product of the Academy, that fact alone might account for its preservation, whether its content was confused or not. Later, some of its status must have stemmed from veneration of any Socratic dialogue. If the author was supposed to have been Aeschines or Xenophon, that would have added automatically to its lustre. Still, the *Axiochus* was revered by Renaissance Platonists (Weatherby, 1990:77), and in the sixteenth century a handsome Greek edition was published in Cologne (Monocerotis, 1565), which was later translated by Edmund Spenser, who called it "a Most Excellent Dialogue" (1592: Title page). According to Hutchinson (1992:328) Spenser's translation provided Shakespeare with the "immediate and specific inspiration for the speech of Jacques in *As You Like It* II.vii. 139–66 — 'All the world's a stage'". Naturally, none of this shows that the *Axiochus* is not confused, but perhaps it gives some hope that it is redeemable.

As for confusion, we ought to note how blatant the worst of it is. Assuming that the Epicurean argument implies *post mortem* non-existence, the space in which Socrates asserts contradictory statements is a mere four lines: at 365e2 we have "for you will not be" (*su gar ouk esēi*), at 365e6 we have "for we are soul, immortal being" (*hēmeis men gar esmen psuchē, zōion athanaton*). To make matters worse, Socrates has only just a few lines before this accused Axiochus of self-contradiction ("you contradict yourself both in what you do and what you say", *seautōi hupenantia kai poieis kai legeis*, 365d1–2). The contradiction that appears when Socrates reprises the Epicurean and Platonic arguments is similarly blatant. At 370a2 we have "the one who is not" (*ho d' ouk ōn*) followed directly by an argument "for the immortality of the soul" (*tēs athanasias tēs psuchēs*, 370b2). Amazingly, this passage also contains within it a rebuke of Axiochus for self-refutation ("but now you contradict yourself" *nun de peritrepeis seauton*, 370a6–7).

Socrates' accusation that Axiochus contradicts himself is worth our attention. The self-contradiction is subtle, to say the least. Detecting it shows

that the author of the *Axiochus* is not some philosophical neophyte, but is in fact sensitive to fine distinctions. Let us examine what Socrates says:

> But now you contradict yourself. Being afraid to be deprived of the soul, you invest the deprivation with soul, and you dread the absence of perception, but you think that you will grasp perceptually the perception that is not going to be. (370a6–b1)

This rather sophisticated statement takes some unpacking. It appears to Socrates that Axiochus is projecting himself (mistakenly) into his future dead body ("the deprivation") in such a way that he imagines (again mistakenly) that he will feel and experience what is going on with a body that has no capacity to feel or experience anything. The contradiction is believing simultaneously that the dead body can and cannot have experiences. It is not credible that an author capable of this sophistication should fail to notice the much more blatant contradiction between not-being and immortality. We should seek a different explanation.

So, perhaps the *Axiochus* is neither irredeemable nor confused. The reason Furley assumes the author is confused is that he takes each statement made by Socrates and Axiochus at face value, without regard for context. If we suppose that the author is deploying inconsistent arguments intentionally, there is no reason to suppose he is confused. The remaining interpretations of the *Axiochus* that we shall consider all explain the apparent "confusion" as an intentional tactic.

V. Is the *Axiochus* a Hellenistic consolation?

Douglas Hutchinson argues that the inconsistencies of the *Axiochus* are a reflection of its genre. He regards the *Axiochus* as a consolation piece, a type of writing that was widespread in Hellenistic and Roman times. Hellenistic consolation literature derives from display pieces dating back at least as far as Pericles' *Funeral Oration,* and including Hyperides' *Epitaphios*, a fourth century BCE work. Other sources for Hellenistic consolations were therapeutic practices and writings such as Antiphon's "art of pain-relief" (*technē alupias*; ps-Plutarch, *Lives of Ten Orators* I) or Crantor's *On Grief*. Hellenistic consolation literature varied widely in style (including epistles, essays and treatises), length (from as short as 100 lines to as long as 2000 lines), and focus (sometimes grief, sometimes fear). What unites the genre is

its social function, "to provide consolation to specific recipients in specific situations of personal loss" (Scourfield, 2012:16).

Hutchinson acknowledges that if the *Axiochus* is a consolation, it is an unconventional one. We may be more specific: the *Axiochus* fails to meet the expectations for a consolation in two respects. First, because it is fictional, it is not intended to console *specific* recipients for *specific* situations. It is not a stretch, however, to imagine an individual consolation providing relief to a general audience in general circumstances; presumably that is one reason why we still read ancient consolations today. Second, the *Axiochus* does not address a situation of personal loss, at least not in the usual way. Socrates tries to assuage Axiochus' fear of imminent death, not his grief over the loss of someone else. There are, however, other ancient instances of encouragement in the face of death, most notably in Plato's *Apology* and *Phaedo.* These texts have sometimes also been described as consolatory.[13]

Perhaps, then, we may regard the *Axiochus* as a species of consolation, one with a Platonic pedigree. How might that help us with the problem of inconsistency? As Hutchinson (1997:1734) points out, "many letters of consolation freely borrowed arguments from all possible sources, whether or not the ideas were mutually consistent", the reason being that their authors were "less concerned with whether the arguments were true than with whether they were reassuring". Hutchinson further points to the explicit admission of Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations* III.76) that when he was in turmoil over the death of his daughter, he "threw together" (*coniecimus*) consolations from Stoic, Peripatetic, Epicurean and Cyrenaic sources. On this interpretation, the explanation for the inconsistencies in the *Axiochus* is that it was "less concerned with whether the arguments were true than with whether they were reassuring" (Hutchinson, 1997:1734).

Some of the general elements of this interpretation are attractive. There is certainly a resemblance between the *Axiochus* and some known consolations, and the period in which the *Axiochus* was written overlaps at least with some of the consolation literature. The specific claim that this explains the inconsistencies in the *Axiochus* will not work, however. The longer consolations we possess are admittedly highly eclectic. Works like the pseudo-Plutarch *Consolatio ad Apollonium* and Cicero's *Tusculan Dispurtations* III borrow from Academic, Peripatetic, Epicurean, Cynic, Stoic, poetic, and historical sources. Often there is latent tension between the perspectives of

[13] For the *Apology* see Scourfield (2012:28n95). For the *Phaedo*, see Boys-Stones (2012:128), who describes it as an "*Ur-text* of philosophical *consolatio*".

the source material. But a work designed to alleviate suffering need not be too concerned about the tension, say, between Stoic and Peripatetic positions on *moderate* grief. Anything that will alleviate acute grief will do. At the same time, these works are, in general, a long way out from conjoining argumnts that are directly contradictory, and even further away from expressing a contradiction in the space of four lines. Cicero may have thrown the kitchen sink at his grief, but I can find no point in his writings on grief where he accepts a contradiction. Indeed, there is not a single parallel, among any of the well-known consolations, to the contradictions in the *Axiochus*.[14] It is worth noting, too, that the consolations of similar length to the *Axiochus* (e.g. Seneca's and Cicero's letters) are rigorously consistent, while the tensions in the longer, eclectic works are mitigated by lengthy transitions.

We may return here to the function of a consolation. If the purpose is to alleviate grief or fear, then surely the consoler should avoid blatant contradiction. A consolee who detects contradiction is likely to suspect the motives or the rationality of the consoler. This is even more likely in circumstances where the work is offered to a general audience for general reflection. As we saw, the *Axiochus*, at most, meets this condition. There is no point in considering whether or not Axiochus is likely to be relieved by what Socrates says. The question is whether the *Axiochus* was promoted to general readers who might, on reflection, find the *Axiochus* effective at removing fear of death. Here we find another nail for Hutchinson's coffin. There is no evidence of wide circulation of the *Axiochus*. Our only evidence is that it was preserved within Academic circles. This context of readership makes it less likely that functional eclecticism is the explanation of its inconsistencies.

VI. Is the *Axiochus* a model of therapeutic argumentation?

If the Axiochus does not console anyone and is not intended to console anyone, we should find an explanation for its puzzling content elsewhere.

[14] This includes Seneca's consolatory essays (*ad Marciam, ad Helviam, ad Polybium*), his consolatory letters (*Ep.* 63, 93, 99), Plutarch's *Consolatio ad Uxorem*, Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* and *Letters to Atticus* and the pseudo-Plutarch *Consolatio ad Apollonium*. The only thing that even comes close is a passage in Seneca's *Consolatio ad Polybium*. Section IX of that work begins by expressing the disjunction: either nothing survives death or there is an afterlife. There follows an interlude on the meanness and uncertainty of life, after which it is asserted that the soul is immortal. This is surprising, but not contradictory.

Timothy O'Keefe proposes that the *Axiochus* models therapeutic practice for therapists (or at least potential therapists) without actually offering to console. On this view, readers of the dialogue are expected to observe how Socrates attempts to console Axiochus, and what sort of patient Axiochus is. Many Platonic dialogues do have, as at least one of their functions, the display of a specific kind of philosophical argumentative practice.[15] So, O'Keefe's proposal might be able to explain the function of the *Axiochus* within Academic circles in a way that Hutchinson's proposal cannot. Of course, modelling consolatory practice could be a *secondary* function of works in the consolation genre. What O'Keefe needs, then, is something to differentiate therapeutic works that simply teach how to console, from consolatory works that also happen to model consolatory practice. He achieves this by construing the *Axiochus* as a model for therapy in a particular context: one in which the patient is feeble-minded, irrational or so distracted by emotion as to be unable to think straight. O'Keefe argues that this is Axiochus' condition. He says that Axiochus is "simply confused" by the Epicurean arguments (2006:392), that he is "rather stupid" (2006:395) and "fairly dim" (2006:396).

The difference this makes is that, on O'Keefe's view, readers of the dialogue are not expected to be like Axiochus, nor are they expected to identify with him, as a secondary or vicarious reader of the *Tusculan Disputations* might be expected to identify with Cicero, and feel sympathetic towards needing or wanting any and every kind of argument that can be found. Rather, the idea is that a therapist might see from the *Axiochus* how a decidedly non-philosophical patient may respond favourably even to invalid and inconsistent arguments:

> The *Axiochus* dramatizes a therapeutic argumentative practice in which, in order to calm his patient, Socrates is willing to advance invalid and inconsistent arguments in his own person, to tailor these arguments to the psychological foibles of his audience, to appeal to his audience's emotions, and to engage in evasive manoeuvres when needed in order to keep on the therapeutic course. (O'Keefe, 2012:400)

[15] For example, the *Protagoras* displays Socrates' efforts to engage in cooperative inquiry in contrast to the Sophists' competitive practice. For a full discussion of the portrayal and the importance of its being observed by readers, see Benitez (1992).

On O'Keefe's view, the end of relieving an intellectually deficient patient's fear (or grief), justifies the means of using inconsistent arguments. This practice, he says, is "intellectually defensible", like the "parent who lies to his children about Santa Claus" or the "doctor who deceives a terminally ill patient about his true condition" (2012:405).

Unfortunately for O'Keefe, this proposal about the *Axiochus* fares no better than the previous ones. For one thing, there is no real case for the claim that Axiochus is the dim, stupid, confused interlocutor O'Keefe takes him to be. On the contrary, Axiochus is represented as a man who regularly "listens to reason" (*katēkoos logōn*, 365b3). He admits that in his current condition "a certain fear holds out, that makes the mind unstable on all sides" (365c4–5), but that is not to say he doesn't understand. Of all the Platonic characters, Axiochus most closely resembles Crito, not the sharpest interlocutor, but a sincere and committed friend of Socratic method, whose resolve is prone to lapse under extreme conditions, yet who can be brought round through persistent reminders. The sole evidence for calling Axiochus dimwitted comes from a passage at 369d–e, which Jackson Hershbell (whose translation O'Keefe uses) renders as follows:

> You've taken those clever ideas from the nonsense, that everybody's talking nowadays, like all this tomfoolery dreamed up for youngsters. But it distresses me to be deprived of the goods of life, even if you marshal arguments more persuasive than those, Socrates. My mind doesn't understand them and is distracted by the fancy talk; they go in one ear and out the other; they make for a splendid parade of words, but they miss the mark. My suffering is not relieved by ingenuity: it's satisfied only by what can come down to my level.

This is eloquent English, but it is very misleading. It suggests that Axiochus is incapable of understanding complex arguments ("*my* mind doesn't understand") and that he requires simplification ("down to *my* level"). The Greek text, however, does not say this at all. For the sake of transparency, here is the Greek text, along with a rather literal translation:

> Σὺ μὲν ἐκ τῆς ἐπιπολαζούσης τὰ νῦν λεσχηνείας τὰ
> σοφὰ ταῦτα προήρηκας· ἐκεῖθεν γάρ ἐστιν ἥδε ἡ φλυαρολογία
> πρὸς τὰ μειράκια διακεκοσμημένη· ἐμὲ δὲ ἡ στέρησις τῶν
> ἀγαθῶν τοῦ ζῆν λυπεῖ, κἂν πιθανωτέρους τούτων λόγους

> ἀρτικροτήσης, ὦ Σώκρατες. οὐκ ἐπαΐει γὰρ ὁ νοῦς ἀποπλανώμενος εἰς εὐεπείας λόγων, οὐδὲ ἅπτεται ταῦτα τῆς ὁμοχροίας, ἀλλ' εἰς μὲν πομπὴν καὶ ῥημάτων ἀγλαϊσμὸν ἀνύτει, τῆς δὲ ἀληθείας ἀποδεῖ. τὰ δὲ παθήματα σοφισμάτων οὐκ ἀνέχεται, μόνοις δὲ ἀρκεῖται τοῖς δυναμένοις καθικέσθαι τῆς ψυχῆς. (369d1–e2)
>
> You have produced the clever arguments from popular gossip, for from there comes the nonsense that has been crafted for the youth. But the deprivation of life's goods hurts, even if you marshal more persuasive arguments than these, Socrates. For the mind does not comprehend them — it is led astray by eloquence — nor do they touch the surface of the skin. They effect pomp and ornament, but are bereft of truth. Sufferings are not alleviated by sophisms, they are only slaked by what can penetrate the mind (*psuchē*).

Note that there is no possessive pronoun anywhere in the speech. Axiochus does not say "*my* mind", "*my* suffering", or "*my* level". Nor does he say that the arguments "go in one ear and out the other" — in this case Hershbell, reaching for a modern idiom, has failed to appreciate the careful distinction that Axiochus is making. What Axiochus says, referring to Prodicus' arguments, is that they are the product of sophistry. Eloquent they may be, but they lack reason, and therefore they are incomprehensible. When Axiochus says "they do not touch the surface of the skin" he does not mean that they "go in one ear and out the other" but rather that they are not *noetic*; they are not the sort of thing that admit of comprehension. Hence he says they are "bereft of truth" (a judgment that is inexplicable on the hypothesis that Axiochus is saying *he* cannot understand them). And Axiochus says nothing that even resembles "come down to my level"; his final statement is actually a plea for sound reasoning as the only thing that can genuinely alleviate suffering. This is no less than what we would expect from a companion of Socrates.

If Axiochus is not stupid or dim or confused, then O'Keefe's explanation of Socrates' use of inconsistent arguments evaporates, since it was only on the condition that a therapist was working with an interlocutor of that sort that use of inconsistent arguments was indicated. Moreover, even if we accept that Axiochus is intellectually challenged, O'Keefe's proposal is not an attractive one. For Socrates, as we noted earlier, twice points out to Axiochus that the fear he has is based on a contradictory impression, and he encourages Axiochus to dispel the contradiction. If the *Axiochus* were

modeling a practice that uses contradictions to persuade unwitting patients, it should not at the same time be asking those same patients to unmask and neutralise contradictions.

Finally, we should note that O'Keefe's interpretation of the *Axiochus* presents an unattractive view of the therapist-patient relationship. Many would dispute his claim that it is *intellectually* defensible to lie about Santa Clause or to lie to a terminally ill patient about his condition. More importantly, it is hard to see how tolerance of contradiction could fit with any account of Platonic therapy. If there is one thing Socrates persistently cross-examines people for, it is to rid them of contradictory beliefs. O'Keefe (2012:406) tries to get around this objection by pointing to Socrates' advocacy of "beneficial lying" in the *Republic.* That Socrates should recommend a noble lie for the masses is beyond the scope of discussion here, but one thing is clear: the noble lie is not merely a means to an end but a *representation* of that end. Strictly, it is false, but it is (or Plato thinks it is) like unto truth. By contrast, believing a contradiction implies a deception in the soul, and that, says Socrates is the most loathsome of all conditions (*Republic* II.382b).

VII. Parody in the *Axiochus*

There is a better explanation for the inconsistencies in the *Axiochus*. It starts by embracing the ineffectiveness of the therapy it describes. While many people still read ancient consolations for the solace they can provide,[16] there is no advocate who defends the *Axiochus* as "ideal bedside reading" (Hadas, 1958:13).[17] It is simply not effective at reducing fear of death. Of course, within the frame of the dialogue, Socrates is effective, but that only heightens the feeling of how ineffective the dialogue really is. When Axiochus turns the corner, he says "there is no more fear of death in me; but already even a longing [*sc*. for death]" (370e1) and "I have let go of the fear of death so much that I already passionately desire it" (372a10–11). These dramatic about-faces are laughably unrealistic. Genuine transformation from fear to acceptance is a slow and ultimately quiet process.

We should consider, then, that the *Axiochus* might be a parody of therapeutic argument. In its most basic form, ancient parody "reproduces a

[16] See Baltussen (2012:xvii) "We can recognize the pain, the sorrow and the joy in historical accounts, because they resonate with our own experiences".

[17] Hadas says this about the letters of Seneca.

passage, large or small, from an author, but changes it in part, so that it is made to apply to a humbler subject or is used in less serious circumstances than the original author intended" (Lelièvre, 1954:66). More often, a parody imitates general style or content and is not based on a particular passage (Lelièvre, 1954:67–68). The *Axiochus* does not reproduce specific passages from any known text. Its Epicurean arguments contain language that is similar to texts of Epicurus, but they also parallel arguments in Lucretius.

Its presentation of arguments from disparate philosophical sources is reminiscent of the ps-Plutarch *Ad Apollonium*, Plutarch's *ad Uxorem* and Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, but eclectic works like these existed throughout the Hellenistic period. Uncertainty about the author and date of the *Axiochus* require us to resist specifying a particular object of parody. Nevertheless, we can see how the *Axiochus* can parody specific types of argument without identifying a specific historical target. Ancient parody requires its audience to recognise the general conventions of the target genre (Rose, 1992:19). In this way it is essentially meta-narrative (Muecke, 1977:55–56). While looking superficially like the genre it imitates, it informs its audience that it has a function distinct from that of the target genre. If the *Axiochus* were a parody, that would explain both its resemblance to consolation literature (which Hutchinson noticed) and its having a secondary purpose (which O'Keefe noticed) without its being either a consolation or a model of therapeutic practice. We might say that it is not a model but a skit.

There are many elements of parody in the *Axiochus*, in both form and content. As we noted earlier, in brevity and simplicity it resembles Plato's comic dialogues *Ion* and *Hippias Major* more than it resembles the serious consolation literature. There is no gravity or solemnity in the *Axiochus*, as there is in most consolations. In fact, the seriousness of the situation is dramatically weakened by Clinias' disclosure that Axiochus has been in his near-death state before and that "many times he has rallied from these symptoms" (364c7–8). Thus, when we meet Axiochus he is "already strong in body" (365a3), and his "sobbing and groaning and hand-wringing" (365a4–5) seem more like affectations than indications that he is about to die. Then, too, in the introduction to the Cynic argument, Socrates explicitly cites the comic poet Epicharmus for saying "one hand washes the other", and then rather delightfully parodies the meaning. He does not take the

apothegm in its standard sense of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" but satirically, to suggest that Prodicus takes money with the right hand *and* the left. This sets the tone for the parody of life that follows, which was, as we noted earlier, the inspiration for Shakespeare's parody of life in the comedy *As You Like It*.

The whole Cynic argument is in fact more of a light-hearted whinge than a dirge, from its complaint that crying is the only way an infant can express itself (366d) to its old-saw summation of the agricultural life as "one big blister" (*holon helkos*, 368c2, trans. Hershbell). Throughout its course, Socrates alleviates not fear, but seriousness, with mocking asides. For example, he says "it would take too long to go through the works of the poets" (367d1), but he goes through several anyway. Then he says "but I'll stop", yet he does not stop (368a5), and in the midst of going on and on he finds time for an auto-parodic parenthesis: "for I'm omitting many things" (368c6). This is a wonderful parody, not only of sophistic speeches (within frame) but also of the longer Hellenistic consolation pieces, which are replete with rhetorical flourishes, citations of poets, appeals to common experience and exemplary anecdotes.

All of the other arguments, as scholars freely admit, are close paraphrases of consolatory advice commonly adduced in Hellenistic literature. The description of the Epicurean argument as "nonsense" (*phluarologia*, 369d2), and Axiochus' overzealous passion for the mystery religion argument (372a10) suggest that the purpose of the paraphrase is parody. Presenting a set of inconsistent arguments would further heighten the sense of parody, if our author expects his audience to be familiar with the eclectic tendencies of some consolations. That is, the employment of arguments that directly contradict one another, which is not seen elsewhere in the consolation genre, can be explained as a parodic flourish.

VIII. Socratic therapy (parody with a point)

If the *Axiochus* is a parody, however, it is not mere parody. Part of its purpose is to send up Hellenistic therapeutic practice. At the same time, however, it suggests a different approach to grief and fear, one which is consistent with the practice of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues. This approach is not so much a cure for grief or fear, but an intellectual diversion from it, ironically

by directing thought to the consideration of arguments *about* loss or death. This practice is finely illustrated in Plato's *Phaedo*, in which the interlocutors, who are "frightened like children" (77d7) are led away from their fears for a few hours by the careful and persistent consideration of arguments for the immortality of the soul. Socrates, in fact, is insistent that his interlocutors do not give up the consideration of arguments (89b–c).

In the *Axiochus*, if we bother to look, we see this same practice, and the same insistence on thinking and reasoning. In the opening scene, Clinias tells Socrates "now is the chance to display that wisdom of yours" (364b3–4). He then asks Socrates to reassure Axiochus in his customary way (*hōs eiōthas*, 364c2). Clinias may not understand Socratic wisdom or Socrates' customary way, but readers of Plato would, and they would expect to see it. Anyone paying attention will not be disappointed. Among the first things Socrates asks Axiochus to do is "consider" (*epilogiēi*, 365b1). He reminds Axiochus that he is a man who "listens to reason" (*katēkoos logōn*, 365b3) and tells him that he is "old enough for thinking" (365b7–8). Soon afterwards he professes his usual ignorance about things great and small (366b), and at the conclusion of the dialogue he reminds Axiochus again that he must decide for himself (372a). *This* has an effect on Axiochus, but not the unbelievable effect of curing his fear. He says to Socrates, "but now, quietly and on my own, I will reconsider the things that have been said" (372a13–14), and he bids Socrates to return again later (presumably to discuss these matters again).

The parody of the Axiochus has, as its target, therapeutic practices precisely of the kind that O'Keefe describes — practices whose aim is to induce an effect by any means, particularly through the dogmatic presentation of inadequate reasons. This kind of therapy barely scratches the surface of the skin. The *Axiochus* offers a different kind of therapy: the practice of philosophical consideration, a practice whose aim is to touch the soul.

IX. Conclusion

This interpretation of the *Axiochus* explains more of its puzzling features than other interpretations. It allows for it to express contradictory arguments without confusion. It explains how the dialogue is different from literature

that is squarely within the consolation genre. It acknowledges that the *Axiochus* is not attempting to console but to show something significant about consolations and therapeutic practice. It does not condescend to dim-witted interlocutors or patients but respects their intellectual autonomy. Most importantly, it displays what it takes to be a more genuine therapeutic practice that is consistent with Plato's Socrates. Indeed, the supposition that the *Axiochus* implores its readers to consider arguments and therapeutic practice, without dogmatism, is consistent with the attitudes within the Academy at the time the *Axiochus* is likely to have been produced. Do we have, in the *Axiochus* a work of the Sceptical Academy? That is something for another time. But we can say, I think, that we have a work deserving of more serious attention than it has previously been given.

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